

Young people's perceptions of wellbeing: the importance of peer relationships in Slovak schools

This article explores the wellbeing experiences of 15-year-old students in Slovakia, who have repeatedly scored among the lowest ranks in the international reports on wellbeing, (PISA 2003, PISA 2012, HBSC 2009/2010). In a qualitative enquiry, students from one urban and one rural school in Slovakia were invited to participate. Semi-structured interviews (n = 8) and two focus groups (n = 12) were conducted in total. The focus groups engaged in a creative activity and prepared a banner for the next year cohort. The analytical approach of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology revealed that students consider peer relationships as crucial to their wellbeing experiences in school. They would welcome having more guidance in developing their communication and interpersonal skills as part of the official curricula. As Slovak education places considerate emphasis on academic learning and performance, the findings imply that giving students a more active voice promotes meeting their educational and developmental needs.

Keywords: wellbeing, transcendental phenomenology, participatory research, young people, primary education, peer relationships, Slovakia

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNESCO) and other organisations actively promote children and young people's wellbeing.

International reports put out by these organisations monitor socioeconomic factors and perceived happiness across the globe. In Slovakia, adolescents are repeatedly ranked among the least happy in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 and their sense of belonging to school decreased between PISA 2003 and 2012 studies (OECD, 2013). Similarly, in the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) published by the WHO, Slovak adolescents scored lowest in the domain of 'liking school' (Currie et al., 2012). Therefore, the OECD (2013) and Currie et al. (2012) reports reveal that young people's wellbeing in Slovakia is of concern. However, such studies, based on self-report measures, are limited in fostering an understanding of why exactly young people in Slovakia feel dissatisfied with their school experiences. This warrants further investigation; furthermore, qualitative approaches are useful as a starting point from which to generate insights into what students are thinking and feeling.

Apart from the aforementioned international surveys, the assessment of Slovak adolescents' wellbeing in school has been limited. Sarkova (2010) conducted a survey-based study on the self-esteem of Slovak youth. School context was considered as one of the factors related to bullying, peer and teacher relationships (Sarkova, 2010). Further quantitative analysis of the HBSC results focused on bullying (Sarkova et al., 2014). Research deploying a qualitative approach to explore students' wellbeing has been lacking in Slovakia. Currently, the local Community and Health Research Network (Coherent) at the Faculty of Medicine in Kosice is working on an in depth analysis of the adolescents' conceptualisation of wellbeing (telephone discussion with Dr. Novakova, 2 June 2016). People in the Coherent group are experts on social aspects of health. In collaboration with international organisations (e.g. World Health Organization, European Health Psychology Society) and universities (e.g. L'Agència de

Salut Pública de Barcelona, University of Groningen, Swiss School of Public Health, University of Southern Denmark, Deakin University Melbourne, University of Copenhagen, University of St. Andrews), the group researches the quality of life of children, young people and adults and provides feedback to policy makers (www.coherent.sk). Coherent collects and analyses the HBSC results, and in the latest report, the group directly discusses the meanings of survey questions with students. Although this approach fills in the gap in qualitative studies to some extent, it is guided by predefined areas assessed in the HBSC. The current study was therefore designed to offer a more open forum to Slovak students and aspired to begin to give active voice to adolescents to express what wellbeing means to them personally. Although this article reports on peer relationships as a key aspect influencing wellbeing, the overall research project sought answers to the below questions:

- 1. What factors shape the wellbeing experiences of Slovak students in their daily encounters in school?*
- 2. How can educational practice be developed to enhance the wellbeing experiences of Slovak students?*

To begin to understand why young Slovaks are so unhappy, it is necessary to outline some history of the state of education in Slovakia. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Slovak education has been somewhat neglected in the overall transformation to democracy. Over the last 25 years, Slovakia has seen 18 ministers of education from 10 different political parties (Kampan a dost [Campaign: Enough], 2016). This quick turnover has not provided enough will and time to follow a long-term strategy or conduct fundamental reforms in schooling practice. In addition, the educational budget allocation positions Slovakia in the lowest ranks of the OECD's Education at a Glance 2015 report assessing the quality of schools' educational resources and expenditure on

educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (OECD, 2013). The European Commission recommends 5.3 per cent GDP allocation into schooling, which in Slovakia reaches only 3.8 per cent (TA3, 2014). Finally, Slovak teachers have been demanding more finances and innovation by conducting a series of industrial actions in the past year. In brief, the frequent teachers' strikes, a low budget for education, and lack of stability in educational leadership have contributed to the currently unfavourable state of Slovak education.

To elaborate on the context of Slovakia, the relevant characteristics of the school system need to be provided. The target group of 15-year-olds was selected to reflect findings from the aforementioned international reports that also use this age group. These students are in their last year of primary school, which they start at the age of six. This is contrary to many other countries, where students at this age are already in secondary school. The final year of primary school is quite important for the future education and perhaps even the career path of students. They sit at least two main exams that assess their knowledge about Slovak language, literature and math at the national level. These tests are called Monitors, they are conducted at the same time in the entire country and the results are being compared across the schools. Other subjects like humanities, chemistry, biology, physics, foreign languages and others are not being assessed at the national level at this stage of schooling; however, students do still need to sit regular assessment in each subject.

In addition, some students may need to take admission exams for secondary schools, gymnasiums, vocational schools, or secondary professional schools. Admission testing may depend on the students' grades, number of applications, or particular focus of the school. To illustrate, bilingual gymnasiums assess the proficiency in foreign languages, in which students are being taught. Most of the secondary schools have a

specific focus to prepare students for their professions. Good grades from Monitors promote students' chances of being admitted to their preferred secondary schools and allow them to skip the admission testing. Therefore, students and their parents recognise the importance of Monitors and want to perform well. The academic pressure from testing intensifies with the teachers' interests in achieving good results as a school because they reflect on the perceived quality of the teaching practice. The setup of the education system suggests that Slovak 15-year-olds experience very specific circumstances in their final year of the primary school. This contextual depiction is further complemented with the outline of relevant wellbeing theories.

Theoretical background

Before young Slovakian's views on wellbeing can be explored, we need to turn to the literature on wellbeing, particularly in the school context. Fundamental wellbeing philosophies and models are introduced next in order to describe the conceptual understanding adopted in the study. In line with the emphasis of this article, empirical studies about peer relationships of Slovak 15-year-olds are briefly summarised.

Conceptualising wellbeing in the school context

The Good Childhood Report (Rees et al., 2013) outlines hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives on wellbeing and links them with relevant theories. Promoting happiness and pleasure, hedonic or subjective wellbeing builds on Diener's (1984) tripartite model of positive affect, negative emotions and life satisfaction. Eudaimonic or psychological wellbeing emphasises positive functioning, which is reflected in the psychological wellbeing scale (Ryff, 1989) or self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Some researchers avoid strictly following one wellbeing philosophy when exploring these

phenomena. This is because a specific viewpoint on wellbeing may not accurately reflect the perception of specific individuals and limit their responses (Kashdan et al., 2008). Strong correlations ranging from .76 to .96 between variables assessing subjective or psychological wellbeing lead other researchers (Disabato et al., 2015; Gallagher et al., 2009; Linley et al., 2009) to promote a more general approach to wellbeing research. In line with these considerations, and due to its exploratory nature, this study embraced hedonic and eudaimonic philosophies and remained open to wellbeing constructs as perceived by the respondents.

The combined philosophical approach to wellbeing has been used in international surveys (e.g. European Social Survey, OECD Better Life Index) and tools measuring wellbeing in school (e.g. McLellan & Steward, 2015). Furthermore, the WHO (2012) recognises both dimensions when assessing wellbeing. From the mental health perspective, the Ten Element Map model (MacDonald & O'Hara, 1998) reflects hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing. It identifies ten components including emotional processing, social participation, stress, self-management skills, environmental quality, self-esteem, and others, which can either promote or demote mental health (MacDonald & O'Hara, 1998). In addition, the model considers micro, meso and macro dimensions (MacDonald & O'Hara, 1998) of a person's life, which resonates with the Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological system theory, providing a developmental angle for the current study. Although the Ten Element map and Bronfenbrenner models usefully outline factors affecting wellbeing, these formed a backdrop to help contextualise the findings. This project did not strictly follow a particular theory. Instead, the study took an exploratory stance, thus allowing the different facets of wellbeing to emerge from the findings.

Relationships and students' wellbeing

As this paper concentrates on the importance of peer relationships, the theoretical review presents previous studies on wellbeing within the school context. Students identified their relationships and interactions with peers as crucial to their wellbeing when participating in qualitative studies (e.g. Kostenius & Öhring, 2006; Simmons et al., 2014) and quantitative studies (e.g. León & Núñez, 2013; Horstmanshof et al., 2008). The importance of relationships has been also captured in the aforementioned wellbeing theories. The elements of affect in the tripartite model (Diener, 1984), relatedness in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and positive relations in Ryff's (1989) model of wellbeing imply that relationships are an essential part of wellbeing. The Ten Element map also balances social participation and emotional processing with social alienation and emotional negligence when determining mental health (MacDonald & O'Hara, 1998). Likewise, the bioecological model considers interactions with peers, family, neighbours and community as factors overlapping all of the system layers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, the criticality of relationships for one's wellbeing is not limited to a specific perspective such as hedonic or eudaimonic wellbeing, health, or a developmental approach.

In Slovak education, peer relationships have also proved to significantly contribute to adolescents' experiences of bullying, anxiety/depression, social dysfunction and self-esteem (Sarkova et al., 2014). However, without prescribing the wellbeing constructs, what is the role of peers within the overall perception of wellbeing of Slovak 15-year-olds? This study aimed to make a case for an active voice of students and allow them to express their conceptualisation of wellbeing. Focusing on the positive experiences the study balanced out the previous projects that gave attention to bullying in Slovakia (Sarkova, 2010; Sarkova et al., 2014).

Methodology

The current project adopted a qualitative approach in order to start to unpack the quantitative findings from international surveys and previous studies on wellbeing of young people in Slovakia. Phenomenological enquiry was deployed to support eliciting an in-depth knowledge of the lived wellbeing experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

Since international studies targeted 15-year-olds, the current study accordingly focuses on this age group. The project deployed semi-structured interviews and focus groups to elicit the conceptualisation and factors affecting adolescents' wellbeing in school context. Criterion sampling was applied to identify one rural and one urban school, and students from the last year's class were recruited.

Participatory research study

Giving adolescents an active voice was an important aspect of the study. According to Hart (1992), the surveys in which students participates (e.g. PISA, HBSC) cannot be referred as true participation because adolescents are treated as a source of data only. Therefore, this project aimed to take the educational research in Slovakia to the next step in Hart's (1992) ladder of participation. The tools measuring wellbeing draw on constructs intended to be understood by adults, which may fail to consider adolescents' perceptions (Fattore et al., 2007). In Slovakia, an added challenge lies in conveying the conceptual understanding of wellbeing, which has no direct translation from English. Therefore, actively involving students in reflecting on their own wellbeing in school is even more important in order to understand what lies behind the negative scoring in international surveys.

Procedure

Ethical approval was awarded from the Faculty of Education in the University of Cambridge, following the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society and British Educational Research Association. Relevant ethical approvals in Slovakia were also sought, however it was determined that there is no official body providing ethical clearance for research in primary schools. Instead, head teachers and parents made the decision. In addition, students' parents provided their informed consent prior to data collection. Before starting in either the interview ($n = 8$) or the focus group ($n = 12$), students gave their assent to participate. The selected participants were recommended by the class teachers from a larger group that signed up. Teachers believed these students were confident speakers and representing the voice of the class. Students from both rural and urban school were gender balanced. Those from the rural school spent less time together during after school activities whereas the urban students were part of the same handball and volleyball teams. The respondents were quite willing to be involved in the study and did not mind if they were directly quoted or even if their names were to be mentioned in the study. Even so, pseudonyms were used.

Before going to the field, the researcher (the first author) identified and attempted to put aside their own knowledge and experience about wellbeing in order to prevent personal bias (Creswell, 2013). Personal reflections and experiences of wellbeing in different cultural settings were written in an epoche - a step recommended by Husserl (1859) and Moustakas (1994). Engaging in this attitudinal shift helped the researcher with focusing on the participants' understanding and lived experiences of the wellbeing phenomena. The recorded one-on-one interviews and notes taken during the sessions formed the basis of preliminary findings. The interview schedule included open-ended questions (i.e. *What does it mean when you say 'I had a good day in*

school'?, What makes you feel good at school?) and probes (i.e. *Could you describe that moment?, I am curious, what was it like for you?)* to explore students' conceptualisation of wellbeing and how different aspects of school experiences may affect students' wellbeing. The questions were inspired from previous literature and studies (e.g. Hall, 2010; Kostenius & Öhring, 2006) and transformed to an open-ended version. According to the theoretical models (i.e. Bronfenbrenner, 1978; MacDonald & O'Hara, 1998; Ryff, 1989), several different areas were targeted including social relationships, environment and self-management (i.e. *Who do you like the most at school?, Where is the coolest place at school?, What are the things that school/teachers could do to make you feel better in school?, How about you, what could you do to feel good at school?).* Following interviews, the initial themes were presented at two focus group meetings, one in each school, for further discussion. Both groups included previously interviewed students as well as new ones.

In focus group settings, after reminding students about the ethics and outlining the topics of the discussion, students were invited to participate in a creative activity. Similar creative means of eliciting meaning have been used in previous wellbeing studies (Kostenius & Öhring, 2006; Matthews et al., 2015). As a result of a pilot, the original drawing and collage plan was adapted into making a banner for the next cohort, advising them *How to enjoy (and survive) the last year of primary school* [in Slovak: *Ako si uzit (a prežit) devinu*]. To overcome initial hesitation, the participants and the researcher started with a quick sketch. Some students continued doodling throughout the discussion, which demonstrated that various forms of graffiti allow more flexible opportunities for expressing ideas. While designing the banner and discussing the initial findings, students confirmed and elaborated on the preliminary themes identified in the overall project. Specifically, the main topics covered Finishing primary school,

Academic achievement and support, Teachers' approach and behaviours, Peer relationships. Examples of the question and probe format included *I understand that one of the things that make feel good in school is....Have I gathered this correctly? Could you tell me how this actually influences how you feel?* As a result of individual discussion about each finding, students were invited to agree on one or several slogans that were to promote respective aspect of wellbeing. Mottos were put on the banner and presented as an advice to future cohorts. In addition, the participants provided more examples about the preliminary themes, which strengthened the conceptualisation of the findings.

The study was conducted in Slovak language and schedules for interviews and focus groups were translated from English. Three other Slovak native speakers validated the translations independently and helped with editing the format. Recordings were translated to English when simultaneously transcribed by the first author, who is a Slovak native speaker living in an English speaking countries for the past thirteen years. Transcripts were coded using the NVivo 11 Pro application (QSR International). The analysis followed Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenology, which deemphasises the role of researcher in interpreting the participants' description of the phenomena. In line with phenomenology and qualitative discovery-oriented approach, inductive data analysis promoted the understanding of wellbeing perceptions specific to students and facilitated the development of categories, subthemes and main themes from the data. Thus, the tentative findings capture the true nature of the participants' descriptions of wellbeing in the study. Through series of discussions, both authors have critically assessed the emerging conceptualisations of students' wellbeing.

Results

The phenomenological analysis revealed a number of interlinked themes, which were drawn from one to one interviews and focus groups. The self-assessment of students' own wellbeing experiences in school was reflected through the frequency of words used in the coding names. These are captured in the word cloud displayed in the map of Slovakia (Figure 1).

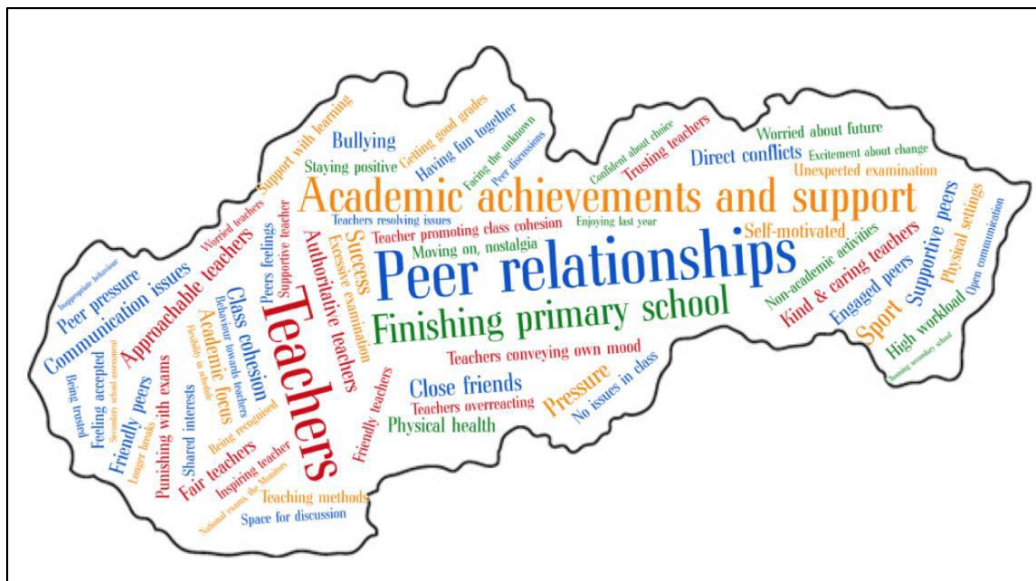


Figure 1. Word cloud of the data codes

The participating students perceived their wellbeing as the result of balancing academic pressures and managing their relationships in school. Their answers to the open ended question *What does it mean when you say 'I had a good day in school'?* mostly referred to having no examination or testing surprises during the day and no arguments or conflicts in the class. The importance of peer relationships emerged as one of the key themes and was supported by codes grouped into related categories. These will now be described and illustrated with direct quote examples from interviews and focused groups. Examples from the transcribed participants' responses are coded U and R to specify whether the student comes from the urban or rural school. Participant or focus group indicate the data collection method and the identifies a particular student. To

illustrate, U-Participant 5 means this quote comes from the fifth participant in one to one interview, who attends urban school. R-Focus Group 2 P1 stands for the first participant in the second focus group, which was conducted in the rural school.

Close and supportive friendships, group cohesion

All respondents revealed that getting on well with peers fundamentally contributes to their wellbeing experiences in school. Having close friends in the class motivates students to go to school.

I like going to school. And I like my girl-friend too. So even if it is not because of studying, or even if I am not prepared, I just go to school because of her. And the guys too, and the others... (R-Participant 1)

How I feel in school, whether I am ok or not, that depends on my classmates (U-Participant 7)

The participants appreciated having someone to trust and talk to about sensitive issues. Supportive friendships are important when helping to overcome negative feelings from the day or when they do not get on well with the others in the class.

...they have always been able to improve my mood... help me in any situation... (U-Participant 8)

Group cohesion in class came up as an important wellbeing factor for all respondents. However, some students felt that during the last year of their primary school, their class became more coherent while others felt the opposite.

In the class, we have formed little subgroups, it has always been like this. And we rarely get on well as a class. (R-Participant 2)

Now as a class, we get on really well in comparison to previous years... We spend more time together and talk more as a group, we negotiate more. (R-Participant 3)

Every student believes that the general feeling in the class affects their individual's wellbeing.

When there is a good mood in class, you immediately feel better. It's not so tense.
(U-Participant 5)

When prompted about any examples in which teachers can promote class cohesion, the second focus group appreciated including collaborative and open discussion tasks in the lecture design.

Working together on joined tasks during class and supporting each other as we do in English class, for example when we get a list with a partial conversation and need to find our partner, who has the second part of the dialogue. (U-Focus Group 2 P2)

In their responses, the participating students highlighted the characteristics of individual and group relationships that contribute to their lived wellbeing experiences. Their perceived levels of trust, support and group cohesion dictate the nature of their wellbeing in school. In addition, the students recognised the reciprocity between their own feelings and the atmosphere in class.

Communication issues

When talking about peer relationships, every student referred to communication issues.

Unresolved disputes among peers can escalate to open class conflicts, which often remain unresolved.

I don't like when people have issues they don't speak up directly. Instead, they talk behind each other's back... and it escalates... (R-Focus Group 1 P1 [interrupted])

And most of the time it becomes a conflict. (R-Focus Group 1 P4)

...and then it gets to the teacher and nothing gets resolved anyway. (R-Focus Group 1 P1 [continued])

The inability to have open communication in class affects how students feel even if they are not part of the discussion.

Well, we actually cannot [talk to each other] and that's what bothers me about our class... the guys cannot talk among themselves, so when someone feels upset, they usually just say something abusive or offensive, and it is hard. (U-Participant 8)

Most students wish that the class would get on well and enjoy the day in school.

The school would be better if we did not fight. (R-Participant 4)

I want to get on well with everyone. I don't like fights and when people are mean to each other. (U-Participant 8)

Recognising the importance of class communication on their own wellbeing, participants included relevant advice in their banners for the next year cohort (Figure 2).

Together! Talk to each other. Respect each other. Trust each other. Make compromises! (U-Focus Group, art work)

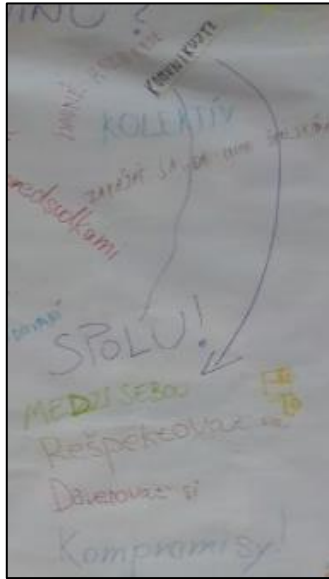


Figure 2. U-Focus Group 2 art work

In summary, the students believed that communication is critical to their relationships and how they feel in school. Personal conflicts and unresolved disputes among other classmates contribute to the class dynamics, which in return affects the wellbeing experiences of individual students. Students expressed a wish to have structured support for developing their communication skills and enhance their relationships.

Bullying

Half of the participants reported being bullied or feeling isolated at some stage in school when describing how peer relationships and class dynamics contribute to their wellbeing.

For example, when you have a group in the class that does not quite like you, it does affect you. You feel down and do not feel like going to school, and you don't feel like studying, because like 'why bother if they don't want me there?' and so on. (U-Participant 6)

Based on the portrayed experiences of students, physical appearance seems to be the main reason for bullying.

It (bullying) didn't happen only once...they laughed about her clothing and her behaviour. They find something about everybody and bullied my classmate about her teeth and me too. (U-Participant 8)

A couple of participants who indicated they had experienced bullying demonstrated empathy towards others and awareness of how bullying can affect them.

If someone wants to say their opinion, they should be polite and not offensive. ...because then it hurts the other person when someone is making fun of them and they're afraid of self-actualisation or joining activities because they are scared of being mocked.... If a person is bad and does the wrong things, I take it as an example of how not to be like her/him. Everyone should realise how they would feel in that situation. (U-Participant 8)

Some participating students had tried to resolve bullying issue on behalf of a peer at first with the class and when unsuccessful, they took the matter to a teacher afterwards. This group however did not feel that involving a teacher resolves incidents satisfactorily or prevents future incidents from happening. Although the teacher explained the impact of bullying to the class, these students believed that the real change needs to happen within their classmates.

Students' recommendations for improving current practice and promote their peer relationships

As part of giving an active voice to students, the respondents were asked to make direct recommendations for improving the current practice. They were made aware that these

suggestions may not be implemented but that this should be taken as an opportunity to present their own ideas.

Three participants made suggestions about improving peer relationships. In agreement, the other students proposed having lectures on mastering social skills.

We need to learn how we should coexist together in class. (R-Focus Group P1)

They recognised the need for improved interpersonal communication and would welcome opportunities to have open discussion about class matters, including interpersonal relationships.

We should have more opportunities to talk together, for example if we had one class, where we could talk together like this. (U-Focus Group 2 P3)

The participants believed that learning about relationships, communication and conflict resolution would help students navigate through the complexity of their social lives. They believed that similar learnings would positively affect students' wellbeing and enhance the development of their interpersonal skills.

Discussion

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study deploying phenomenological analysis, which aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Slovak students' wellbeing. Results from the overall project are briefly revisited before presenting a more focused discussion emphasising the role of peer relationships in students' wellbeing. Next, relevant suggestions made by the participants are summarised and considered in light of educational studies and developmental theories. Finally, this section specifies some of the key limitations of the study.

The 15-year-old students reported having a good day in school depends on whether they are able to successfully balance academic pressures and have positive interpersonal relationships. Their conceptualisation of wellbeing links to both philosophical perspectives on wellbeing. Aligning with the hedonic wellbeing (Diener, 1984), the respondents highlighted the importance of good mood in class, absence of arguments, and satisfaction with their academic achievements. However, psychological wellbeing or eudaimonic notions (Ryff, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 1990) seem to prevail in students' understandings of their own wellbeing. This tendency to conceptualise their wellbeing from the functioning perspective of hedonia as opposed to the eudaimonic pleasure seeking appears to derive from the extensive academic focus of the last year in primary school. The participants inclined to link their wellbeing with achieving good results, getting accepted to the secondary school of their choice and feeling content about their academic performance.

The participants deem their peer relations and class dynamics the most crucial factors influencing their psychological wellbeing in school. Their relationships and interactions with peers can either make them feel better or evoke adverse emotions, which then influence their motivation and performance in school. In their dealings with peers, the participants consider communication to be an essential vehicle for a positive atmosphere in the class. However, unresolved conflicts often escalate to the point when the whole group suffers. At an individual level, negative comments about a peer are perceived as damaging. Making fun of physical appearance leads to students' isolation and damages their functioning in the class. Such a perception is in parallel with the social participation/social alienation components of the Ten element map (MacDonald & O'Hara, 1998). Students identified opportunities where targeted guidance from teachers could lead to improvement of their communication as well as their interactions.

Consequently, they would be able to better manage their relationships in class and feel better in school.

Influence of relationships on students' wellbeing

Overall, the participants highlighted the influence of peer relationships as one of the most fundamental aspects contributing to their wellbeing experiences in school. This qualitative finding complements an earlier project of Sarkova et al. (2014), who identified a statistically significant association between peer relationships and psychological wellbeing among Slovak adolescents. In the current study, students confirmed that peer relationships affect everything that is going on in their school lives. Having a friend in class motivates students to go to school. In addition, peers often discuss and even decide together about their selection of secondary school. Working together as a group has been perceived as important for having good time during lectures as well as non-academic activities.

From a developmental perspective, these findings align with adolescence studies. During this period, young adults are becoming more independent and peers replace parental support to a certain extent (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). The focus of adolescents' needs changes towards social interactions and some participants enjoy going to school because of meeting their friends. The same was echoed in Gristy's (2012) project where children perceived going to school as an entirely social activity. Although previous qualitative work on wellbeing has not considered Slovakia specifically, it appears that Slovak students are no different in this regard.

In addition to fulfilling the adolescents' social needs, positive peer relationships help reduce social anxiety and depression among this population (Hecht, Inderbitzen, & Bukowski, 1998). Equally, positive correlations between wellbeing and peer relationships were demonstrated in participatory studies adopting quantitative (e.g.

Horstmanshof et al., 2008) and qualitative (e.g. Fattore et al., 2007; Soutter, et al., 2014) approaches. Previous studies and the current project indicate peer relationships as crucial to how students feel in school. Therefore, relationships with peers should be considered as a valid construct assessing wellbeing. To obtain more authentic results, international surveys might consider asking students directly about their peer relationships experiences when measuring their wellbeing.

Students call for receiving guidance about communication and relationship management

Despite the goal of education to transform lives (UNESCO, 2014), the Slovak education system tends to focus solely on the academic performance of students. In the last year of primary schools, academic pressure increases because students need to sit several exams which influence their chances of getting into their desired secondary school. The Monitor series of national assessment are universally taken on the same date by all primary schools. on the same date. Monitor results are important to students, parents as well as teachers, who believe that the quality of their teaching is mirrored in students' performance. The participating schools supported the preparation for the Monitor assessment by adapting the schedule a couple of weeks before the exam date. Students focused on the specific subjects only and revised topics that can potentially appear in the tests. While most of the participating students appreciated the additional support, in general, they feel that their academic performance is being overemphasised. At the same time, the participants remarked that the development of their social skills, including stress management or handling of relationships is rather neglected.

In comparison to other countries such as the UK or Ireland, Slovak schools do not hold regular classes on social, psychological and health education. Although Slovak students have some time with their form tutor, this is in the format of a weekly lesson,

which does not allow for the development of the desired social skills. Instead, these sessions are similar to the regular form time that the British and Irish students have with their class teacher. According to the responses from students in this study, these form time lectures are insufficient. Although they do provide a forum for discussing class matters, the lectures focus mainly on administration and class management. There is a lack of opportunity to build students' communication, conflict or relationships management skills. Recognising the importance of these abilities for their positive wellbeing experiences in school, the participants call for structured lectures that would meet their personal development needs.

The ideas these Slovak students have for enhancing educational practice are supported in the literature. First of all, the students' need for improved interactions in school is addressed by Michalos (2008), who considers effective communication as a primary learning goal in education. Moreover, Howe and Mercer (2007) bring peer interaction into the learning process and promote peer collaborative teaching methods. This approach is based on Vygotsky's (1978) social learning and Piaget's (1985) notion of learning through discussions with peers. Nevertheless, Howe and Mercer (2007) contend that providing space is not enough for the social learning to occur. Ultimately, the teachers as facilitators need to step in and navigate students through their discussions and resolutions of potential conflicts (Howe & Mercer, 2007). As a result, teacher training and the expectations of the teacher role have to be considered before the hopes of these students to receive guidance in managing their peer relationships can be acted upon. Teachers and policy makers need to consider to what extent students' expectations are feasible.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study is its small scale. The participating schools are located in one region, which restricts the gathering of representative experiences of adolescents across the entire country. However, despite the small size, as this is the first study of its type in Slovakia, it sheds useful insight into the lived wellbeing experiences of a group of students. Further limitations include not collecting socioeconomic data and the focus of the study on school context. Therefore, it does not capture events affecting students' wellbeing outside of school. Additionally, the limitations of transcendental phenomenology could have been overcome with the help of external validator. This would enhance the reliability of the findings. The fact that there is no direct translation of 'wellbeing' to Slovak language was an important cultural constraint to the study. The researcher tried to overcome this by asking several people, including English language teachers to advise on the correct form of the translation. Earlier studies use the term 'duševná pohoda,' which however has a mental health connotation. Therefore, a more universal word 'pohoda' and other descriptive forms of translation were used.

In addition to the above limitations, an event that occurred in one of the schools might have affected students' responses. During the data collection period, the class that participated in the study got into a conflict with teachers. One of the students placed a sticky tape on the teacher's chair and caused a major dispute between the class and the teachers. As a result, the class had to take an extra examination and could not go to their final year trip. The interviews and focus groups were reminded to describe their wellbeing experiences in general, outside of the current incident. It is important to note that the presented findings emerged and were verified in both schools, suggesting this incident did not unduly influence the findings.

Conclusion

The overall study aimed to complement the findings from international reports on students' wellbeing and explore what lies behind the negative trends of self-reported wellbeing of Slovak 15-year-olds with the vision to illustrate how ideas for improving education might be obtained from students. The focal group scored repeatedly lowly in the international reports on wellbeing; therefore, this study offered an alternative to explore what lies behind the unfavourable statistics. This paper focuses on the importance of peer relationships, which the participants in this study consider as an essential aspect of their wellbeing experiences in school. The main contributions of this paper are to promote active voice to students, who according to the participants, are seldom approached to express their perceptions in school. In their efforts to continue improving schooling practice, the authorities might neglect the fact that students are the ultimate receivers of the educational service. According to the limited evidence from this study, Slovak education tends to focus on improving academic results and insufficiently consider the whole school approach to learning. Academic performance and wellbeing experiences are correlated (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012); and so, the policy makers should not keep overlooking the negative trends in wellbeing surveys of Slovak students even when prioritising academic results. To ensure that all goals of education are met, students should have an opportunity to actively participate not only in educational research (McIntyre, 1998) but also to contribute to the decision making process.

In addition, the study design serves as an example of various methods deployed in a qualitative discovery-oriented approach, using phenomenological analysis. It demonstrates an original approach for enhancing the current knowledge in the field of educational psychology in Slovakia and potentially post-soviet education in central and

eastern Europe. It proposes that the findings from international reports need to be explored qualitatively to provide richer and localised data behind the wellbeing statistics and capture the nature of their wellbeing experiences. Moreover, these reports could be made more authentic if wellbeing items in the surveys would explore specific aspects contributing to how students feel in school. Open-ended questions or free text fields might enrich the findings.

Further to promoting qualitative methodology and student voice, the study shows a tentative discovery specific to Slovak education settings. The participants expressed their unique need for socioemotional development and communication in school settings. Therefore, it might be worth expanding this population to other 15-year-olds in Slovakia and conduct a larger study to see whether the same applies more generally and educational practice may need to be modified. Taking the avenue of involving students in similar proposals would perhaps help the Slovak governing bodies understand what measures to take if they wish to tackle the negative results in international studies and enhance the overall schooling system and practice.

Based on the limited findings from this study, it seems as the current educational settings in Slovakia could benefit from fostering a more holistic approach to development and learning. According to the participants, their academic performance is overemphasised and conducting more research into this aspect of Slovak schooling could provide useful data. More specifically, examining how the system setup encourages head teachers, teachers and guidance counsellors to promote personal, social and health education of students would reveal whether changes to system, practice or both are needed. Introducing a relevant subject in the official curricula together with promoting less structured activities (i.e. world cultures day, dealing with exam stress and anxiety workshops, effective communication training) would give students

opportunities to actively participate in the discussions and learn through their experiences. In this manner, students would have more opportunities to engage in teamwork, collaborative learning and development, which would ultimately improve their perceived wellbeing in school.

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